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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000679

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SCA/CACEN FOR FRESE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM TX](#)

SUBJECT: NIYAZOV'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS JUSTIFY WIDESPREAD  
DESTRUCTION OF PRIVATE HOMES

REF: ASHGABAT 652

Classified By: (U) AMBASSADOR TRACEY JACOBSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B AND D)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) On June 20, DCM, Conoff, and CAO met with Ashyrmurad Garayev and Gurbangeldi Akgayev, two representatives of the Ashgabat city government who are involved in the Ashgabat "White City" beautification program that has destroyed thousands of private homes, rendering thousands more homeless. Garayev and Akgayev defended the destruction of private homes in order to implement the regime's plans to build a modern Ashgabat and refused to believe the DCM's assertions that people were being left homeless. The DCM, whose own house is slated for destruction, informed Garayev and Akgayev that this widespread destruction of homes was included in the Department of State's Human Rights Report on Turkmenistan as a serious violation of human rights. END SUMMARY.

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THE HOME WRECKERS  
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¶2. (C) According to Garayev, Ashgabat's beautification program is heralding a new era for the capital. During Soviet times, Moscow neglected Ashgabat's infrastructure and development. As a result, Ashgabat, until independence, lacked modern industrial enterprises, cultural centers, transportation facilities and sporting venues. Thanks to independence and the president's policies, he said, city planners have embarked on a bold program to renovate the city and do away with the Soviet-era vestiges of Ashgabat's past. Ashgabat residents will no longer have to live in old, dilapidated houses, he said and now could live in new, modern, white marble apartments, while attending cultural events in new modern theaters and flying in and out of Ashgabat in comfort thanks to a new modern airport. Those who lost houses in the process were guaranteed new housing, he claimed, and they were grateful for the improved housing. He saw no reason why people should complain about the beautification process, or the loss of their homes, since they were compensated and given ample time to vacate their houses and find new accommodations. Besides he added, nobody was complaining.

¶3. (C) The DCM, whose own residence, like that of the MSG and two foreign ambassadors, is slated for destruction, disagreed, noting that she, and the 3000 other people who live in her neighborhood were given less than 20 days to vacate their homes before they were to be destroyed (Note: The MFA later informed the embassy that DCM had "a year" to

find a new residence. End Note). DCM told Garayev that many locals approached the embassy to complain they were losing their homes without warning and/or compensation in the hopes the embassy could intercede on their behalf. Many have complained that the local authorities refuse to explain their actions, or address their concerns. The DCM added that the USG described the beautification program as a serious human rights violation in the annual Human Rights Report.

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DON'T BELIEVE WHAT YOU SEE  
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14. (C) Garayev angrily defended the beautification policy, asking "you talk about human rights, but what about the law in Turkmenistan?" Many of these homes are built illegally and as a result should not exist. However, even these people receive housing. Such beautification programs happen all over the world, including in America. Akgayev added "We know what is really happening since we live here." Conoff added that American diplomats also live here and bear witness. Garayev suggested that those who were dissatisfied with their evictions were free to contact city authorities, who would do their best to solve their problems.

15. (C) DCM related a number of individual cases of home destruction where residents had informed her personally that they had received no compensation, alternative housing or adequate notice. She noted one case where an ethnic Russian military pensioner widow was evicted from what she had thought was dedicated military housing with 48 hours notice and in the place of this housing, the municipal government had planted pine saplings. Garayev heatedly denied this was possible citing the existence of an "evictions committee" that gave priority treatment to senior citizens and veterans.

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Garayev was noncommittal when DCM repeatedly asked if she could call him directly to address individual cases when they were brought to the embassy's attention.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) Although Garayev and Akgayev do not personally drive the bulldozers tearing down Ashgabat's housing, they are intimately involved in all aspects of the beautification program. State media regularly touts the regime's "Ashgabat - White City" beautification plans, currently slated to last to 2020, that will create a modern city of white marble skyscrapers and apartment blocks, with grandiose fountains, a man-made lake, and of course statues to the president. Since embarking on this program, Ashgabat's skyline has been transformed into a city with tall monolithic marble buildings surrounded by great fountains and gold statues to the president, which visitors frequently refer to as "Pyongyang mixed with Las Vegas."

17. (C) While Garayev's assertion that the beautification process is transforming Ashgabat into a modern city is arguable, it is coming at an immense price \* - thousands of people are evicted from their homes and massive bombastic largely empty structures are built for millions of dollars while education and health needs largely go unmet. However, as seen in the recent "spy affair" allegedly involving French and OSCE diplomats (reftel), it appears that the government may be aware that the beautification process is one of the few issues here that could ignite popular unrest against the regime should it continue on its present course and a group of brave citizens finally decide enough is enough. END

COMMENT.  
JACOBSON